

London Telegraph's obituaries are really to die (laughing) for

3-23-00



George F. Will

WASHINGTON — It is frequently observed that whereas earlier ages were forthright in discussing death but reticent about sex, this age is loquacious to the point of tedium about sex but flinches

from dealing with death as a fact of life. Hence epitaphs and obituaries are less entertaining than they should be.

Time was, graveyards offered good reading, and newspapers' obituary pages were things to savor with morning coffee. An epitaph can deliver a stinging rebuke, as does this one in a Georgia cemetery: "I told you I was sick!" Or this from Richmond, Va.: "She always said her feet were killing her but nobody believed her." A Girard, Pa., tombstone warns consumers:

Ellen Shannon

Who was fatally burned

March 21, 1870

by the explosion of a lamp

filled with "R.E. Danforth's

Non-Explosive Burning Fluid"

However, tombstones are small tablets, so those who write on them cannot wax and meander as the obituary writers for the London Daily Telegraph did when producing the gems that have been published in "The Daily Telegraph Book of Obituaries: A Celebration of Eccentric Lives."

The book's subtitle contains one secret of success for an obituary page that aims to brighten the days of the living: Give space to odd people, concerning whom a certain understatement is often called for, as in this: "Liberace's

private tastes were steeped in absence of sobriety." Of the artist Adrian Daintrey, a friend of the more distinguished artist Augustus John, the Telegraph delicately wrote: "Daintrey also shared John's wholehearted admiration for the opposite sex, many of whom showed their appreciation in the most practical manner."

Readers surely learned the essence of the 6th Earl of Carnarvon in the description of him as a "relentless raconteur and most uncompromisingly direct ladies' man" whose chief concern when staying at the Ritz in London "was to find a suite not so much overlooking the Park as overlooking the rent."

The Telegraph approved of this judge: "The name of his house in Sussex, Truncheons, symbolised his singular blend of judicial toughness and humour." In a divorce case he let slip his opinion of the husband: "He chose to live in Manchester, a wholly incomprehensible choice for any free man to make." The Telegraph was delicate about Sir Ewan Forbes, a baronet, who "had been registered as a girl at his birth (in 1912) and went by the name of Elizabeth Forbes-Sempill until 1952."

The Telegraph's obituary lyricism is stirred by deaths that intimate the death of eras, as with "Cockie" Hoogterp, an aristocrat: "Cockie was a lily of the field now submerged beneath the manners of a harsher age. Few women, other than the very rich, can have survived into the late 1980s without ever having boiled an egg or made her own bed." Or "Joe" Carstairs, the woman who owned and ruled an island in the British West Indies, which she dotted with signs such as: "I eat brown rice in preference to white. Therefore, if

brown rice is good enough for me and my household, it is good enough or even too good for the people."

Viscount Barrington, whose method of timing a boiled egg "was to recite a fixed number of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam." And: "He could easily have recited the whole lot, for he seemed to have the entire corpus of English poetry at his command. Feed him a line from Browning, and he would simply go on until asked to stop — and sometimes a bit further."

The Telegraph's obituaries may be the most amusing journalism in the English language. British breakfasts were happily seasoned by this about Helle Cristina Habsburg Windsor, who claimed to have been closely related to Spanish royalty: "I was born on the steps of the throne," she used to say. "So awkward for her mother," observed one Lisbon wag. "Of the difficult early career of 'Teasie Weasie' Raymond, the 'flamboyant hairdresser,' the Telegraph noted: "For most of his customers hair-washing was a biannual operation, and curling the ripe strands with a hot iron was too much for his delicate stomach."

The Telegraph sometimes inserts somber editorial comments in obituaries. Of a baronet's conversion to Catholicism, the paper said this placed the deceased "in sharp distinction to his father, whose English Protestant God reflected the appropriate ideas about the British Empire, cricket and banking." Or: "The 3rd Lord Moynihan, who has died in Manila, aged 55, provided, through his character and career, ample ammunition for critics of the hereditary principle."

These are, so to speak, obituaries to die for.

Washington Post Writers Group

the Wasatch Front Regional Council. The council is expected to decide Thursday whether or not to spend mostly federal money for air-quality improvements on the five light-rail cars needed for the

miss a beat!

ki Music and dance editor

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